

STORY of TASK FORCE 6814 (Poppy Force)

Forty-six days after the Japanese crashed down on Pearl Harbor on **On December 7, 1941**, eight grey ships moved out of the Brooklyn Port of Embarkation, picked up escorting naval vessels, and were gone. Few people knew that Task Force 6814, the blood mother of the Americal Division, was sailing into history through the harbor murk that night of **January 23, 1942**.

In recording the history of this hastily gathered force (the first major U. S. Army operation in the Southwest Pacific), its organization, elements, difficulties, and accomplishments, no attempt has been made to cover technical details of the operation, which are to be found in formal reports on record. This history aims to give background and meaning to the whole picture, parts of which are becoming blurred even now. It was a democracy just rolling up its sleeves, and in the future, the marvel may not be that it functioned so well but that it functioned at all.

The force was not in any sense a division. Its parts had never operated together. Its equipment was scanty; its staff were strangers. But speed was of the essence. There was important holding work to be done, and quickly, on the other side of the world.

Assembled from all over the United States, the elements that went into 6814 were: Task Force Headquarters and Detachment, two Infantry regiments, two battalions of medium artillery, two Engineer regiments plus a battalion, two Ordnance companies and parts of two others, a **Signal Company**¹ and MP Platoon, an evacuation and two station hospitals, plus a medical regiment; Post Office, Finance and Chemical units. Other units sailed from Brooklyn and remained in Australia. These will not be discussed because their duty with the Task Force, which became the Americal Division, was mainly that of travel.

The vessels in the original convoy were:

SS Argentina, SS Barry, SS Cristobal, SS Erickson, SS McAndrew, SS Santa Elena, SS Santa Rosa and the **SS Island Mail**. Several ships had been converted from luxury liners in record time by removing nearly all appurtenances and installing pipe bunks. Such actual conversion had to be improvised on the trip.

¹ David would remain with the Signal Company until he was sent home in 1945.

THE SHIPS' HISTORY

During the war **SS Argentina**, one of the large, fast vessels able to sail independently when required, was operated by the War Shipping Administration's agents and allocated to Army troop transport.^[6]

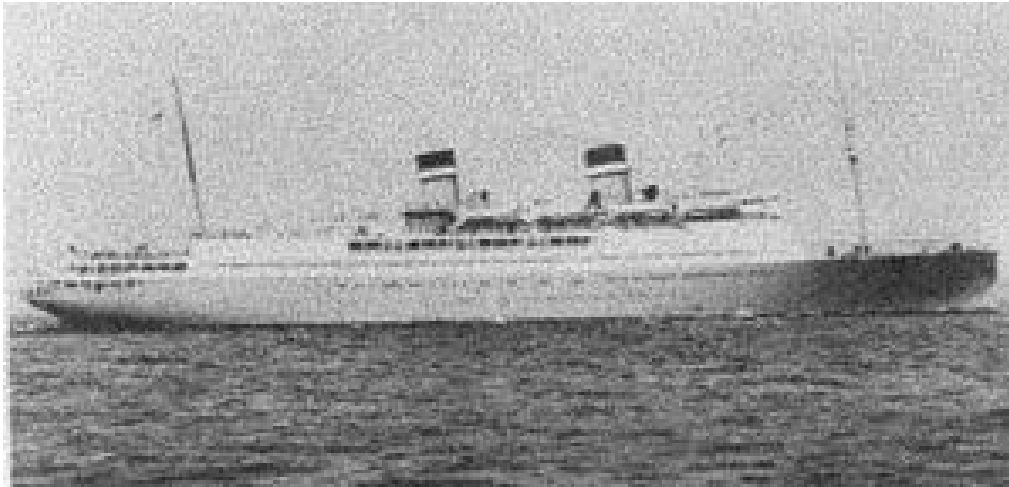


On 23 January 1942, *Argentina* loaded and sailed from the New York Port of Embarkation as the flagship of a convoy of seven troopships, designated Convoy BT.200, under a United States Navy escort, reaching Melbourne, Australia on 27 February. At the time, this troop movement of POPPY FORCE, also designated Task Force 6814, destined for New Caledonia by way of Australia, was the largest attempt, with the entire convoy having a troop capacity of almost 22,000. After reorganizing loading that had hastily loaded in New York, the convoy, redesignated ZK.7, departed Melbourne for New Caledonia on 7 March and arrived on 12 March 1942, where later the force was organized into the Americal Division under General Alexander Patch.

In 1941, future U.S. President John F. Kennedy sailed on "Argentina" from the USA to Brazil and Argentina.

Late in 1963, the United States Department of Commerce offered **Uruguay** for sale.^[3] In 1964 she was sold for scrap to Peck Iron and Metals of Norfolk, Virginia.^[3] Peck re-sold her to Luria Bros, who scrapped her at Kearny, New Jersey.^[3]

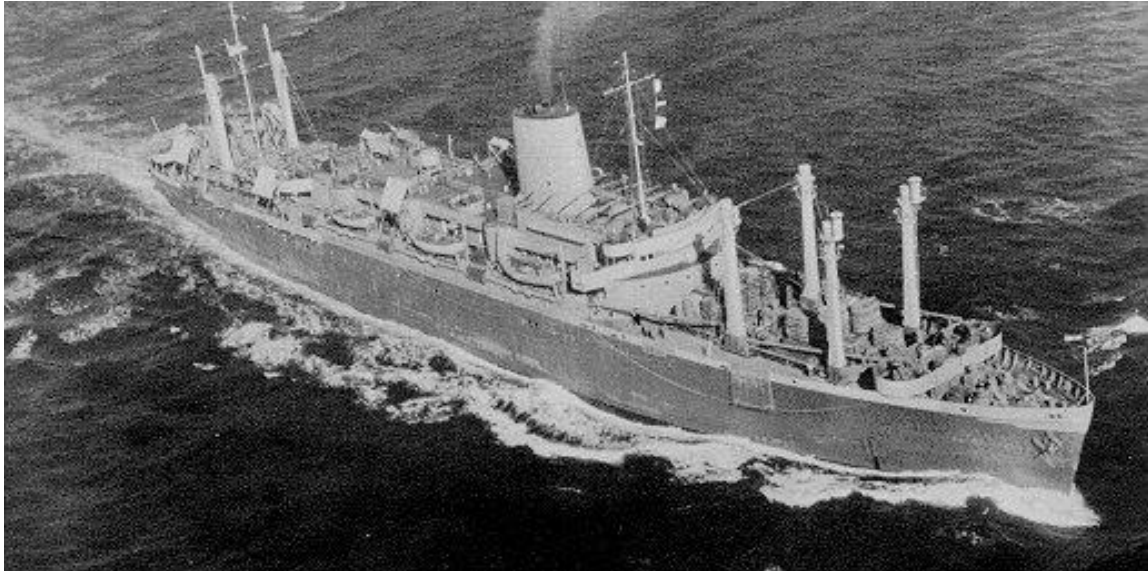
Oriente was among the 28 merchant vessels designated for the Army (21 for the Navy and seven for the Army) requisitioned by the Maritime Commission's Division of Emergency Shipping, announced on 4 June 1941.^[4] The ship was purchased and delivered to the US War Department on 14 June 1941 and renamed **USAT Thomas H. Barry** designated as a troopship.^[2] The ship was one of the relatively few transports owned, rather than bareboat chartered, by the Army.^[5]



Thomas H. Barry was one of seven transports hurriedly assembled in New York and sailing late on 22 January 1941 (23 January GMT) in what was then the largest troop movement attempted, movement Poppy Force, also designated Task Force 6814, under General Alexander Patch to secure New Caledonia (codename Poppy) on the vital South Pacific link to Australia.^[6] The seven ships had a troop capacity of almost 22,000.^[7] Task Force 6814 was later organized in New Caledonia as the Americal Division.^[8]

In the mass transfer of Army ships to the Navy, *Thomas H. Barry* was declared surplus to Navy needs; the title was transferred to the Maritime Commission on 12 December 1949 with the ship laid up in the National Defense Reserve Fleet on the James River, Virginia, on 24 January 1950. She remained there until 4 November 1957, when she was removed by the Bethlehem Shipbuilding Corporation, which had purchased the ship for \$276,780 for scrap on 21 October.^{[2][14]}

The ***S.S. Cristobal*** was requisitioned from the Panama Railroad Company by the U.S. Army on January 11, 1942. Twelve days later -- her trim lines muddled with camouflage paint and partially converted so every valuable inch could be utilized -- the *Cristobal* sailed from New York with troops and supplies. Destination: New Caledonia. However, political relations between the Free French, the Vichy French, and the United States were not yet clear, so the convoy with which *Cristobal* was traveling was diverted to Australia. The ship reloaded, picked up field artillery guns, and proceeded to New Caledonia.



Arriving at Noumea, New Caledonia, in the first part of March 1942, the troops disembarked by using the ship's lifeboats. For days, these troops sweated over the unfamiliar and back-breaking job of handling all cargo by hand. There were no facilities ashore at New Caledonia. Our war was three months old.

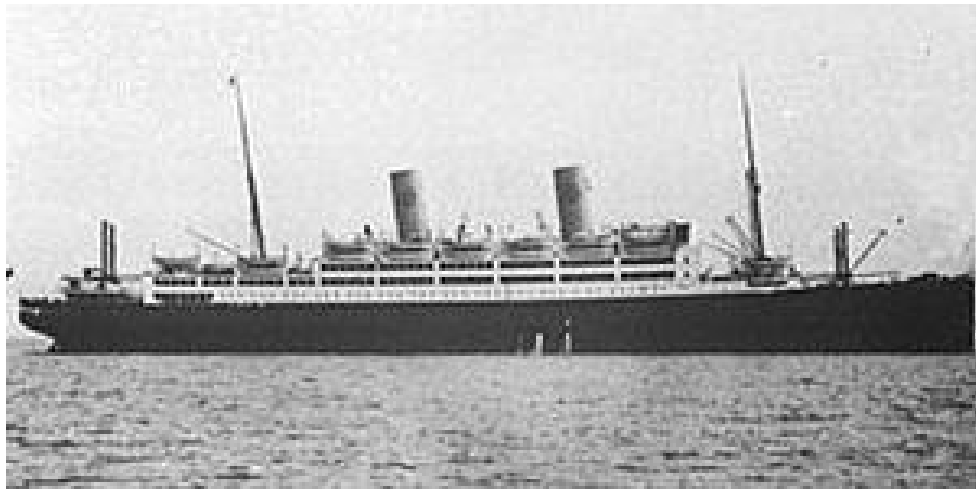
On June 14, 1946, *Cristobal* was returned to the Panama Line, where she continued passenger/cargo service between New York and Panama until April 1961. In June of that year *Cristobal* made her first voyage between New Orleans and Panama, a route she was to ply until her last voyage on September 19, 1981, after 42 years of U.S. Government service.

<http://www.czbrats.com/Articles/sscristobal.htm>

The trans-Atlantic ship **Kungsholm**, of the Swedish American Line, under the command of Captain John Nordlander, was requisitioned effective 31 December 1941, placed under the control of the United States Government's **War Shipping Administration (WSA)**, renamed **SS John Ericsson**, and delivered for contract operation by **United States Lines** as a troop transport largely to meet Army requirements.^{[7][8]}

John Ericsson was one of seven transports hurriedly assembled in New York and sailing late on 22 January 1942 (23 January GMT) in what was then the largest troop movement attempted, the movement of POPPY FORCE, also designated Task Force 6814, under General Alexander Patch to secure New Caledonia (codename POPPY) on the vital South Pacific link to Australia.^[9] At the time this force was being assembled, the ship was allocated to the State Department, and with its addition and cutting troops in convoys across the Atlantic, the seven ships assembled had a troop capacity of almost 22,000. Task Force 6814 was later organized in New Caledonia as the Americal Division.^[11]

John Ericsson was among the large, fast troop transports, capable of running without escorts, that moved freely among wartime theaters as required. These included the large British liners, several allied liners, Navy and Army-operated vessels, and her WSA agent-operated sisters **SS Argentina**, **SS Brazil**, **SS Lurline**, **SS Mariposa**, **SS Monterey**, and **SS Uruguay**.



Instead of returning to service with Swedish American Line, the vessel was sold to Home Lines in 1948 and renamed **MS Italia**. The ship served on various routes with Home Lines, including Genoa—South America, Genoa—New York, Hamburg—New York, Hamburg—Quebec, Bremen- Quebec, New York—Nassau, and cruises from New York to the Caribbean. In 1964, the ship was sold to Freeport Bahama Enterprises for use as a floating hotel under the name **MS Imperial Bahama**. In 1965, she was scrapped at Bilbao.

USAT J. W. McAndrew (AP-47) was a Type C3-P&C troop ship for the United States Army during World War II.



The Bethlehem Sparrows Point Shipyard of Baltimore built the ship in 1940 as **SS Deltargentino** for the United States Maritime Commission on behalf of the Mississippi Shipping Company in 1940 for operation by its Delta Line. The ship was delivered to Mississippi Shipping in November 1940.

Deltargentino was among the ships designated for the Army among the twenty-eight merchant vessels (twenty-one for the Navy and seven for the Army) requisitioned by the Maritime Commission's Division of Emergency Shipping announced on 4 June 1941.^[4] The ship would have been transferred to the Navy and named **USS J. W. McAndrew (AP-47)** in 1943, but this was canceled. While serving as a U.S. Army transport ship in 1945, she collided with French aircraft carrier **Béarn**, resulting in the loss of several lives.^[5] Afterward, the ship was repaired and eventually sold in 1948 to the Farrell Lines for commercial use under the name **SS African Enterprise**.

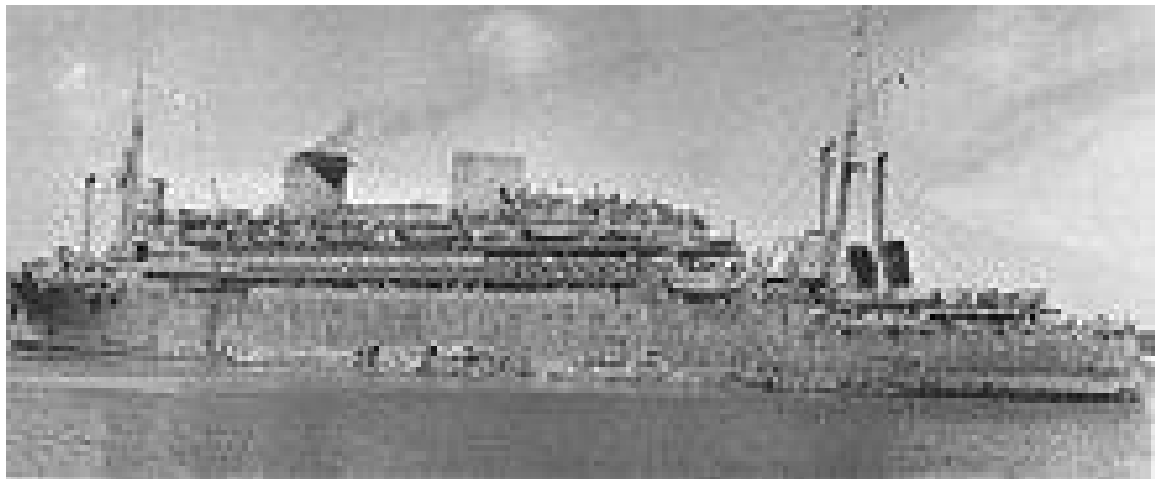
The ship was laid up as part of the National Defense Reserve Fleet in October 1960 and finally sold by the Maritime Administration (MARAD) on 9 April 1969. It was broken up in Baltimore in February 1972.

USS Leedstown (AP-73), (originally **SS Santa Lucia**) was a Grace Line passenger and cargo ocean liner that served as a United States Navy amphibious assault ship in World War II. She was one of four sister ships (**Santa Elena**, **Santa Paula**, and **Santa Rosa**) ordered in 1930 from the Federal Shipbuilding and Drydock Company of Kearny, NJ.

Photo # 19-N-34061 USS Leedstown off the New York Navy Yard, 12 September 1942



The SS Santa Rosa was requisitioned by the US War Shipping Administration on 3 January 1942, with Grace Line operating the ship as agents. It was then allocated to the Army for troop service. Even in wartime gray, the ship retained its elegant ocean liner lines, flaunting its nubile twin funnels, sweeping bow, and long, beautiful lines. She exuded an aura of speed, luxury, and moonlight tropical nights. The **SS Santa Rosa** was sexier than Rita Hayworth in a travel poster.



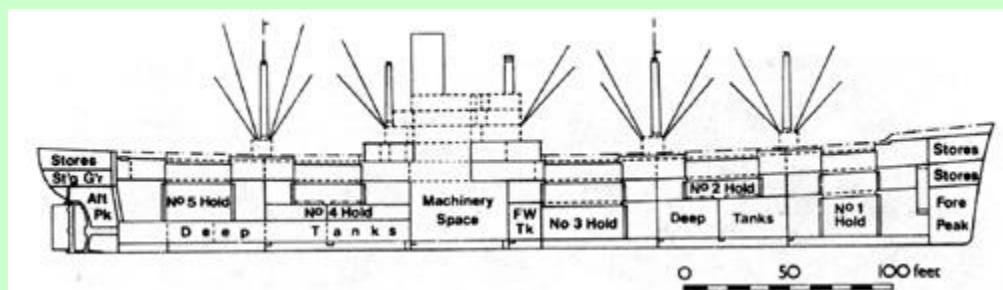
Santa Rosa made 21 voyages from the east coast of the US from 1942-1945: one to Europe, one to Australia, one to India, and three to Africa.

In 1978, she was towed out of layup to use as a film set for **Raise the Titanic**. After a decade of neglect, and with fittings that did not appear out of place on a 1912-built ship, *Athinai* needed very little conversion work to film the Titanic's interiors. Her bows were painted to resemble Titanic, and she was sprayed with green foam to simulate 68 years on the ocean floor. After the filming, she was returned to Phaleron Bay. She remained for another ten years until 1989, when she was towed for scrapping at Aliağa, Turkey in a purge of derelict shipping.

United States Maritime Commission C2 Type Ships

The United States Maritime Commission designed the C2 types in 1937-38. They were all-purpose cargo ships with five holds. One hundred seventy-three were built between 1940 and 1945. The first C2s were 459 feet long, 63 feet broad, 40 feet depth, 25-foot draft. Speed 15.5 knots. Later, ships varied in size. The configurations were:

ISLAND MAIL C2-SU (3 ships built 7,780 Gross tons)



THE VOYAGE of 6814

From New York to Panama, the convoy was heavily screened by destroyers, planes, and even occasional blimps. One submarine scare in Southern waters brought the cool fact of war home to most of the personnel for the first time. Depth charges were dropped, destroyers raced about, and the usual rumor was that the sub was sunk.

The convoy reached **Panama on Jan 31, 1942**. The seas had been calm, and the trip comparatively uneventful. The shakedown to shipboard life and organization was accomplished, Excited preparations were made to visit Panama City. These dreams were never fulfilled as no troops were allowed ashore except on official business. There was some excitement on the Flagship Argentina when one nurse and a medical officer were left behind, catching the convoy later in the trip but not making their original boat. The Task Force newspaper, TWIN-OCEAN GAZETTE, commented, "Navy leaves beauty behind -- Nurse takes another ship without extra slip."

Col. Edmund B. Sebree joined the force by plane as Chief of Staff in Panama. There were no changes in loading at Panama; water was taken on, and on Feb. 1, 1942, the ships moved into the Pacific. Immediately after clearing the canal, the German radio reported the passage of the convoy, giving the number and type of vessels.

Under the direction of Colonel Sebree, the staff organization was completed: Lt. Col. Williamson, G-1; Lt. Col. Moore, G-2; Lt. Col. George, G-3; Lt. Col. Homewood, G-4.

Unit training was carried out aboard the ships through lectures and conferences, as crowded conditions permitted. Jungle tactics, tropical diseases, and gunnery were chief among the subjects studied. Colonel Sebree and Colonel George addressed the officers on board the Argentina to orient them as to what might be ahead. The destination was still unknown.

The long Pacific voyage was surprisingly uneventful. Calm seas marked the whole trip. There were two submarine alerts, but no torpedoes were launched. Because of the hurried conversion of some of the ships, conditions for the men were not of the best. The water supply was very limited. The ration was a canteen a day. Bathing except in salt water was rare. The heat in the closed ships was intolerable at night, but the spirits of the men were good. Radio loudspeaker programs were given, carrying news and musical features. Impromptu vaudeville shows were presented. In several cases, newspapers were published. These carried news jokes and contributions of the men.

On the **SS Argentina**, the **TWIN-OCEAN GAZETTE** led all ship crusades and, in its own words, "Held the Convoy Together." When weather and paper permitted, 2500 copies were printed daily.

The comic trial by King Neptune's Court for all uninitiated on passing the Equator was a highlight for all ship companies. Generals and nurses alike took their bitter sentences with glee and received certificates of proof of their good standing as Equator-passers.

For 27 days, this first U.S. thrust into the Southwest Pacific zigzagged its way toward Australia. One day the Jap radio reported the entire Task Force had been sunk in the mid-Pacific. All concerned were glad of the exaggeration. Arriving at **Melbourne on Feb. 27, 1942**, Australian Liaison Officers met the command on board the ship. The disembarkation order was received from Southern Command, Australian Military Forces. Debarkation was completed on Feb. 28. The troops were dispersed in five major areas: Ballarat, Bendigo, Darley, Royal Park, and Melbourne. The formation of plans for reloading and departure for New Caledonia was started.

This week ashore after 35 cramped days at sea was a moving experience for everyone. The Australians took the soldiers not only to their houses but to their hearts. In Ballarat and Bendigo, the troops were billeted with the townspeople wherever possible, and the latter outdid themselves as hosts. Hundreds of lasting friendships were started. Nine months later, when Christmas came for these men in the Guadalcanal jungles, hundreds of mailbags from Australia showed the warmth of that fleeting week of close American-Australian collaboration. There was a lot of honest weeping when it ended.

The movement back to the ships was difficult because of limited transportation. Additions to cargo were made with little regard for combat needs. The heat at this time seemed terrific to Americans and Australians alike, reaching as high as 115 to 120 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade near the docks.

The artillery units had left the United States without their guns. In Australia, British 18-pounders and 25-pounders were loaded. Two Australian officers and a crew of expert NCOs went along to instruct the Americans in the operation and nomenclature of the new weapons. This work was carried on intensively on the way to New Caledonia and ended for a period after the landing. March 6, 1942, the fleet departed for Noumea, New Caledonia. The advance party left on March 6th by plane. The **SS Erickson**, formerly the old North Atlantic racer, **Kungsholm**, had experienced power trouble on the way over. The first night out of Australia she was delayed and finished the voyage out of convoy, arriving March 18.